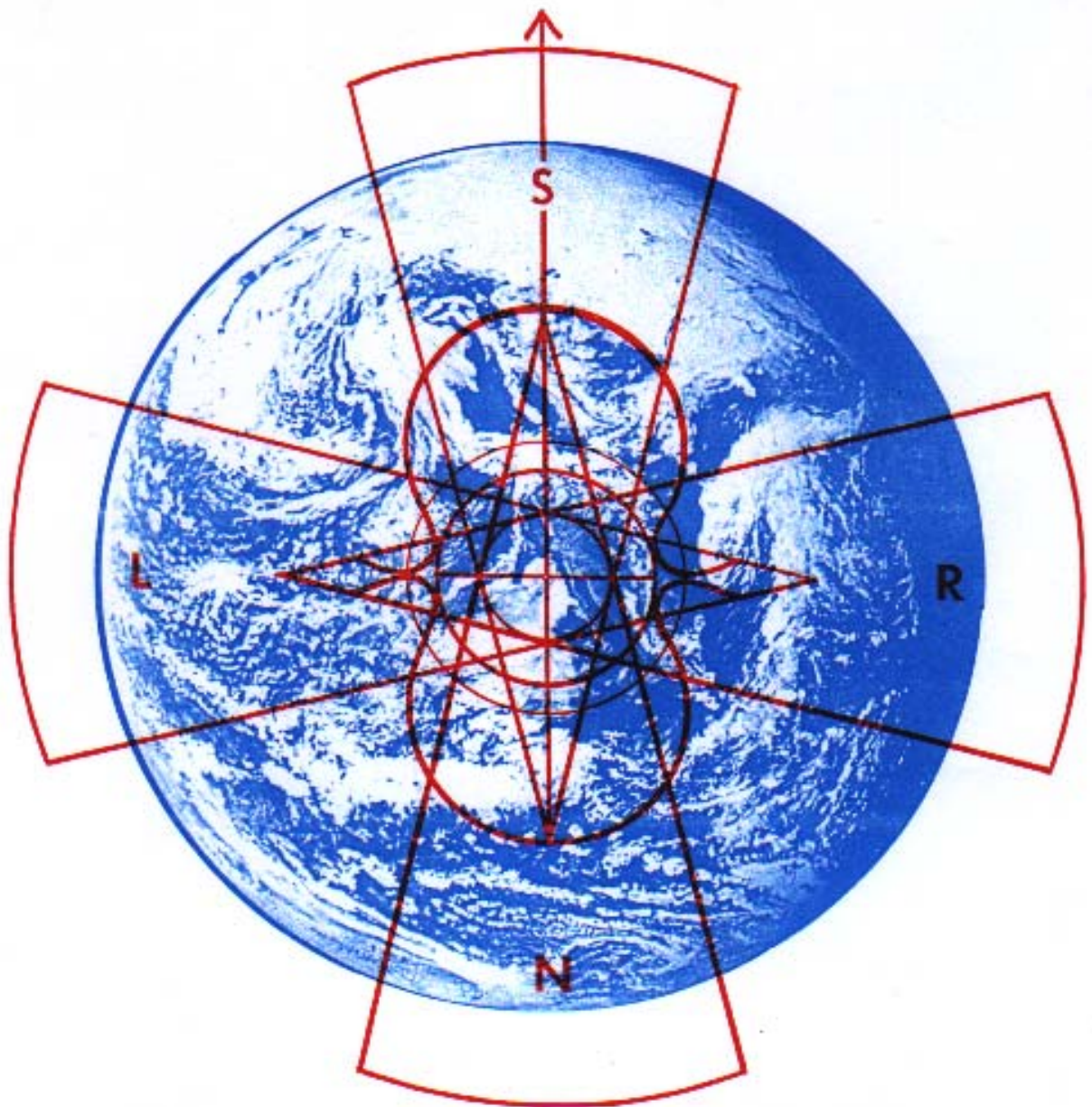


# MERIDIAN MATRIX: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD



by David Wasdell

Produced By: Meridian Programme, Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14  
0AE, Hosted by Unit for Research into Changing Institutions (Urchin),

Charity Reg. No. 284542

Web-site: [www.meridian.org.uk](http://www.meridian.org.uk)

# MERIDIAN MATRIX: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD

Bridging the gap between personal growth and group relations training is at last becoming a practical reality. This convergence of the leading edge of human potential development with some of the most powerful training in inter-personal dynamics has been made possible by a breakthrough in our understanding of the roots of those common unconscious processes which underlie both fields. After an introduction to the new theoretical paradigm, this article looks at some of the design features built into the Meridian Matrix, the application of accelerated learning in human relations training, the emergence of a holistic consultancy style and some of the possible applications and implications of matrix training for the future.

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## TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

The classical psychoanalytic interpretation of behaviour in groups reached an impasse in the early 1950s as W.R. Bion recognised that further progress was blocked by the lack of understanding of the most primitive or psychotic defences against anxiety. In 1956, Elliot Jaques indicated a possible way forward through research in the convergence of depth psychology and group analysis. The psychoanalytic paradigm common to both disciplines was, however, based on a medical or sickness model derived from the study of individual deviance. It was therefore quite unable to serve as a framework for the understanding of those 'normal' or common behaviours which dominate the dynamics of groups and social systems. The 'paranoid-schizoid' processes were described as 'innate' or 'instinctive' and recognised as 'most primitive and resistant to intervention'. Trainers and organisations working in the field of group dynamics guarded against being flooded by individual or personal process, while the analysts and therapists working with individual development tended to be naively innocent of understanding of group process (and as a result their group, organisational and political life was often flooded by unconscious dynamics!). The current splits within and between our national organisations of analysis, therapy, counselling, group dynamics and human relations training, reflect the flaws in the (now outdated) underlying paradigm.

Breakthrough occurred in the late 1970s. Research into the dynamics of organisations under stress indicated that the phenomena were not instinctive but learned responses whose origin lay in the common individual experience of traumatic stress during the process of birth. Meanwhile international research into the depths of the individual unconscious was pointing to the profound and universal impact of birth trauma on the foundation of personal

psychodynamics. Leading theorists were already suggesting that group behaviour, institutional dynamics and some of the most ancient and powerful processes of religion stemmed from the corporate acting out of common early traumata and their associated defences. The link between the individual and the group was made.

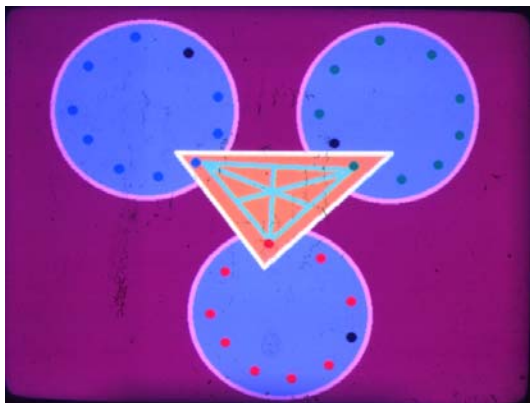
The following decade saw the consolidation of research and the application of the new paradigm to many facets of human process. Therapy began to widen its concern to take in 'normal' as well as 'deviant' behaviour, so moving into the world of human potential development and personal growth.

Instead of the reinforcement of primitive defences, there was now the possibility of the resolution and integration of early imprinting leading to the withdrawal of the projection of the material from interpersonal, institutional and environmental life. The new paradigm opened the way not only to new understanding of group and institutional dynamics but to the possibility of powerful processes of intervention and transformation.

The last five years have seen the evolution of new resources for 'Human Relations Training' based on the new paradigm and combining opportunities for personal growth, primal integration and human potential development with the best practice of group relations training. The 'Meridian Matrix probably represents the leading edge of this development. Its rate of evolution has been limited by the pace of formation of consultants and facilitators able to span the whole field of human unconscious process from the depths of the individual to the full extent of major social systems in transition. The consultant role demands a high level of personal integration, insight, vulnerability and undefendedness as well as a willingness to venture into previously unexplored fields of personal and interpersonal dynamics.

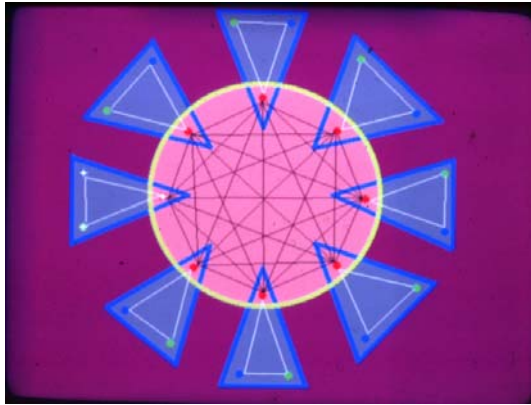
## ELEMENTS OF DESIGN

Matrix design incorporates several innovative features as well as some familiar and proven elements. Working in groups of three has been found to offer much greater resources for personal development than the more usual pairs of the co-counselling scene.



The basic building block of the Matrix is therefore the 'co-consultative triad'. Here, each member in turn has the opportunity to work on the frontier of their own personal development, supported by the empathy, reflexive listening and facilitation of two peers. The triad also provides a context to work experientially on the interpersonal dynamics of the nuclear family and of the triad as a whole in relation to other triads and to the other elements of the matrix.

Matrix participants are not assigned to triad places. Selection and choice-making are the responsibility of members. Triad formation and bonding is a rich and complex process, the unconscious dynamics of which become increasingly clear as the life of the matrix unfolds.

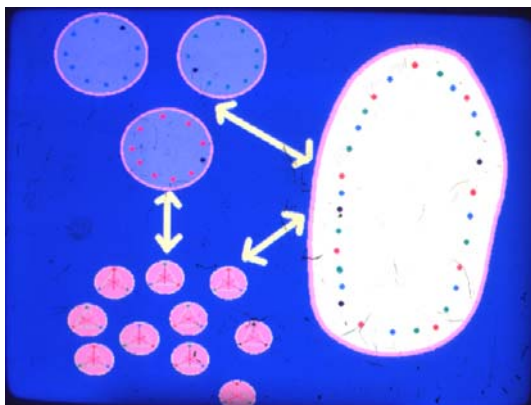


One person from each triad forms a small group. Three groups therefore work in parallel. Each group has a representative from each triad. Each triad has a representative from each small group. A consultant works with each small group and has the task of providing opportunities for the members to learn from the process of the group as it happens. That process includes the depths of the individual experience of the individuals as well as the complex set of interpersonal relationships within the dynamics of the group as a whole. The learning is enhanced by the fact that

the interpersonal dynamics also represent the inter-group dynamics of the set of triads. This also heightens the awareness of the boundary of the small group and of its relationship to the other small groups within the matrix as a whole.

All members of the matrix work together in a large group in which the three small-group consultants serve as a collaborate consultative triad to the large group process. Their task is to provide members with opportunities to learn from the process of the large group as it happens. Learning in the large group is enhanced by the inter-triadic and inter-small-group dynamics which in turn raise awareness of the boundaries of the large group and its inter-relation with its environment.

The new paradigm makes it possible to work with the dynamics of regression not just to early childhood patterns, but to the much more primitive areas of pre and perinatal imprinting. Boundary conditions of group dynamics in particular show up with great intensity the corporate, common and personal imprinting of the experience of birth, the first encounter with major boundary transition.



As the workshop proceeds, the process of each small group and of the large group is worked over and integrated in each triad. Similarly the process of every triad and of the large group is worked on in parallel in each small group, while the dynamics of all triads and small groups contribute to the learning process of the large group itself. One particular triad may be having difficulties working through some heavily defended material, but within hours its members will have worked on the material in each of the small groups, calling on the resources of all the other triads for their

problem-solving. As a result, the triad may well experience a major breakthrough in its next working session. Conversely there may be a particularly significant shift in the dynamics or insight of one of the small groups. By the next small group session the material will have been shared through all the triads and the large group to the other two small groups. In practice these feed-back loops intensify, integrate and accelerate the experiential learning of the whole matrix.

In passing it is worth noting that the multi-dimensional matrix with parallel processing, a complex set of feedback loops and accelerated learning, works as a model of a 'learning organisation'. It therefore offers a training context for managers, trainers and consultants concerned with organisations seeking to optimise their performance under conditions of rapid change, whether internal or environmental.

## DYNAMICS OF DEVELOPMENT

As levels of personal integration increase among the matrix members so the different modes or channels of communication become available. Often initial interaction is dominated by verbal interchange. As sub-dominant hemisphere functions become accessible the communication patterns may move to include symbols and images, drawn, modelled or described verbally. It is as if the waking dream-life of the group is emerging. With the integration of left and right brain goes the integration of right and left sides of the body and the progressive integration of psyche-soma. Body language emerges as carrying significance, whether intra-personal, individual, inter-personal or of the group as a whole. The phase is characterised by somatic abreaction, movement and spontaneous psychodrama.

As early trauma is integrated the associated emotions come to the surface. Previously they may have been split off, repressed, denied, projected and displaced, now they are available to conscious experience and the life of the matrix develops a full spectrum of emotionality. As the inner roots of buried pain are accessed, owned and discharged, so the phantasy-transference into the life of the group is reduced and characterised by increasing reality-testing in the here and now. Integration of the pre and perinatal imprinting releases the process of egression from the previously fixated states of foetal trance which normally characterise the dynamics of a group. The process is one of the deconstruction of the common defences against anxiety which have previously proved so powerfully intransigent in group-relations training.

## LEARNING SYSTEMS FOR TOMORROW'S WORLD

There is a practical ceiling to the number of people who can work together in a small group. As numbers rise above nine or ten, capacity to work in depth with the complete set of personal relations begins to break down. This level of the matrix design therefore has an optimal limit of about thirty people including the triad of consultants. Two or three such sectors can be run in parallel with a second stage to the design introduced after the first two or three days. Here inter-sector small groups are convened drawing one member from each of the small groups in each of the sectors. The basic triads are retained as parallel processing cells and the whole membership of the new level matrix works together as a very large group serviced by the consultative team. This level of matrix design could work with up to about ninety members. It is possible to foresee two or three such sub-matrices combining over a longer time span to give a high-intensity human relations training lab for up to two hundred and seventy members.

The number of people wishing to take part in the Meridian Matrix appears to be more than doubling each year. The initial small workshop of November 1990 has expanded to a set of five or six events in 1993. In addition other training agencies whose members have been involved in Meridian are developing matrix-style designs for a wide variety of courses and events. The objective is to expand the number of centres, increase the frequency of events in each centre and raise the number of people able to take part in each event until high-quality matrix training is within reach of any who would benefit from it. Costs are kept to a minimum and a comprehensive bursary scheme operates for those unable to afford full fees. Consultants and members pay the same amount as the matrix is seen as a peer-group in which all are participating, contributing, receiving and learning at the frontiers of their skill and experience.

Many participants return to the matrix on a regular basis, learning at a different level on each occasion. There is the beginning of a national network of triads and cells working at the continuous task of personal and professional support and development between the matrix workshops. Some take part in the growing consultancy-training groups before trying their hand as an assistant or co-consultant in one of the small groups. As skills develop they are able to explore other roles, always with the support of a peer-learning group. In this way the Meridian Matrix is evolving as a multi-centred learning community dedicated to the widest possible deployment of the highest possible quality of Human Relations Training, personal integration and consultancy-formation. Its task is the development and spread of those skills required for the management of turbulence in the complex systems of tomorrow's world.

David Wasdell  
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Meridian Programme,  
Meridian House, 115 Poplar High Street, London E14 0AE  
Web-site: [www.meridian.org.uk](http://www.meridian.org.uk)  
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